

Reaction to “The Psychology of Confederate Symbols”

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In her presentation entitled, “The Psychology of Confederate Symbols,” Dr. Mara Aruguete made the case that such symbols, like the Confederate flag and statues of Confederate military leaders, serve to unconsciously trigger reactions in White viewers that lead to increased levels of racial bias and, ultimately, discriminatory behavior against people who are African-American. This reaction paper is designed to highlight the strengths in the case that she made and to propose that caution be used when generalizing the conclusions of her presentation to others situations and contexts.

Aruguete based her argument about the divisiveness of Confederate symbols on the concept of ingroup bias, a well-known and well-researched social psychological concept first proposed by Gordon Allport (1954) that contends that human beings have a natural tendency to favor those who are familiar and similar. The flipside of this concept is that unfamiliar and dissimilar others (the outgroup) are typically devalued by most people. Aruguete stated that Confederate monuments have served as a way for White, southern people to claim power by taking over public spaces with these symbols that trigger ingroup bias among other White southerners. She discussed research showing that Black people are more likely to see Confederate symbols as symbols of hate whereas White people are more likely to see them as symbols of heritage. Ironically, the more White southerners supported the use of the Confederate flag, the less well they scored on a test of general Civil War knowledge, according to Aruguete.

After describing the background of Confederate symbols and the meaning of ingroup bias, Aruguete posed the question, “Do Confederate symbols influence behavior?” She

answered her own question by describing two well-designed studies that clearly demonstrated that such symbols did, indeed, affect the behavior of White participants. One study showed how the subliminal presentation of a Confederate flag made White participants less likely to support Black candidates in an election. The other showed how exposure to the Confederate flag led White participants to more negatively evaluate a fairly neutral personality profile of a Black person. With these effects documented, Aruguete went on to question the degree to which having the Mississippi state flag (which has a Confederate flag embedded in it) present in Mississippi courtrooms might negatively impact the decisions of primarily White juries when dealing with Black defendants. She concluded by discussing research that showed how the presence of the American flag tends to make U.S. citizens more biased against perceived outgroup members.

Overall, Aruguete made a compelling case against allowing the presence of Confederate symbols in public spaces. However, I was left with some reservations as to the degree to which her conclusions could be generalized, resulting in the claim that nearly any symbol that triggers ingroup biases could have negative and discriminatory effects on members of an outgroup. The originator of the term, Gordon Allport, did not agree. Further, a review of the research (Brewer, 1999) indicated that ingroup preference and outgroup hate were not necessarily reciprocally related, but instead were independent. Some research indicates that identifying with an ingroup can serve to boost self-esteem. This could be especially useful amongst groups that have traditionally been stigmatized by majority society. For instance, research on sexual and gender minorities indicates that identifying with perceived similar others can enhance self-esteem, resilience, and positive self-perceptions (Riggle and Rostosky, (2012). Thus, the presence of a

rainbow flag during a pride parade would seem more likely to inspire a sense of having a valued and important place in society, not a sense of hatred of heterosexual or cisgendered people.

Even though not all flags or symbols might generate antipathy toward an outgroup, it seems quite likely that Confederate symbols do. Given the violent history and menacing implications of the Confederate flag, along with the research presented by Aruguete, I am in strong support of having all Confederate symbols removed from publicly owned places. I would be happy if no one ever had to see one again.

References

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